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ABSTRACT

This study presents students' responses to the question: "Why do you think they teach you American history in school?" It also provides responses to a second related question: "How might learning history help you in your life away from school?" The study also discusses the types and nature of the rationales students offered and places them against the background context of the U.S. history classroom and curriculum. Subjects were 30 students--12 fifth graders, 12 eighth graders, and 6 high school students from schools in the Midwest. Among the study's conclusions are that presuming that discussions of rationales for studying U.S. history are a sparse feature of standard U.S. history courses, nevertheless, many of these students were able to offer interesting and coherent responses to the question. It is suggested that a shift in how history is learned would see multiple interpretations and points of view, questions of evidence would arise frequently, and debate about the "construction of history" would be common. (Contains 2 tables of data and 44 references.) (BT)

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Reasons Students Give for Studying American History

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Introduction

Students were asked, "Why do you think they teach you American history in school?" Jerome, a fifth grader, replied,

> So you can learn what happened in the past so you'll have some knowledge of what happened and if it was important like the Gulf War or World War II or something. Something major happened in the past and they want you to know about it. [Interviewer: How is it supposed to benefit you?] In case it happens again. If it happened again, you would know what to do.

Responding to the same question, eighth-grader Jarona said,

> I guess so we won't. . .since people say we're the country's future, we can learn from our ancestors' mistakes, so we won't make the same mistakes.

Finally, a high school American history student, Jacob, responded by saying,

> History is the study of stuff that has already happened. Why it's important is learning from our mistakes. We can be sure we learn from our mistakes by knowing what our mistakes were and how they came out, so we don't do the same thing wrong again, at worst, and so we can do the same thing right. We can know what was done wrong, how it was done wrong, and how it can be made right.

Without mentioning him directly, these three students in their own ways invoked George Santayana and his famous rationale for studying history—that those who fail to learn the lessons of the past are condemned to repeat them (cf. Santayana, 1968).

The invocation of Santayana's dictum was a common theme among a group of 30 students in grades five and eight and in high school who were interviewed to understand more about what they learn in their American history courses. Other rationales were also prevalent. This paper presents students' responses to the question provided above along with responses to a second related question: "How might learning history help you in your life away from school?" The paper also discusses the types and nature of the rationales students offered and places them against the background context of the American history classroom and curriculum.

Significance of Students' Responses

In the first chapter of the *National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience* (National Center for History in the Schools 1994), arguably one of the most thorough and far-reaching of the current history curriculum reform documents, the authors open with a multifaceted account of why it is important to learn American history in a democratic society. They observe:

> . . . *knowledge of history is a precondition of political intelligence*. Without history, a society shares no common memory of where it has been, what its core values are, or what decisions of the past account for present circumstances. Without history, we cannot undertake any sensible inquiry into the political, social, or moral issues in society. And without historical knowledge and inquiry, we cannot achieve the informed, discriminating citizenship essential to effective participation in the democratic processes of governance. . . . (1994: 1, emphasis in the original)

Then Thomas Jefferson is called up from the dead to represcribe history "for all those who would take part in self-government because it would enable them to prepare for things yet to come" (1). Following this, the Standards document subtlely draws on Santayana, in ways similar to the students above: "By studying the choices and decisions of the past, students can confront today's problems and choices with a deeper awareness of the alternatives before them and the likely consequences of each" (1). However, the Standards' authors are quick to point out that past problems, and the decisions made to counter them, are not isomorphic with those of the present, urging the need for critical appraisal and the ability to judge relevant from irrelevant antecedents.

This is the view from the world of adult experts, but what do we know about the reasons students construct for learning American history? Do students appropriate these reasons? Do what schools teach them convey these purposes? Do they convey others?

Some investigators who have surveyed students have concluded that students typically view history courses in particular and social studies courses in general with little interest and relegate them to the lower end of a scale showing their view of the importance of school subjects (Fouts 1989; Haladyna, Shaughnessy and Redsun 1982). This trend is disturbing. It raises questions about how students understand why they study American history in school and how they connect it (or not) to their lives. However, the survey studies generally provide few clues.

With current shifts to constructivist orientations toward learning (Resnick and Klopfer 1989) and with the appearance of substantive arguments concerning the importance of teaching for understanding in contrast to teaching for fact mastery (Brophy 1990; Newmann 1990), students' prior knowledge of a subject and their understanding of its characteristics become critical to such pedagogical and learning theory changes. How students view the purpose of engaging in topical or disciplinary study appears deeply connected to what they eventually learn and understand. The purposes they bring to bear on their

efforts to learn about something, and the role their peers, parents, and especially their teachers play in the process, are associated with how they construct meaning and link it to their own lives. Accounts drawn from detailed interview data help bring these purposes into starker relief than survey accounts which tell us much about what they are, but little about how or why they got that way. As Sansom (1987) has observed about Shemilt's analysis of interviews with students for the Schools Council History Project in Great Britain (cf. Shemilt 1980):

> [The analysis] yields rich, fascinating data but [it] is very difficult to quantify, and it does not produce statistically verifiable results; what the interview analysis. . .[does give] us is the possibility of making a judgment about the assumptions the subject brings to his [sic] understanding of history. By collecting. . .assumptions. . .we can then begin to map out the ways children construe the rules of the game. (119)

By paying attention to what students say about the purposes and assumptions they hold for studying the common course requirement, American history, may result in curricular refinements that make their learning experiences more meaningful and longlasting. It also may be valuable to those that teach them as they labor to understand students' assumptions and then help them build powerful rationales for the importance of constructing rich understandings of American history. Additionally, cross-grade comparisons open an albeit small window onto the differences and levels of intellectual sophistication present in these students' thinking. Finally, in that the students represented different ethnic backgrounds and both genders, their responses also open a window onto how such differences may influence their conceptions of purposes.

Research Context

The student views on the purpose for studying American history that provide the focus for this paper are situated within a larger research program. Since in the fall of 1990, I have been conducting comparative case studies of pairs of American history teachers and their students in grades five and eight and at the high school level.[1] Several purposes guided these studies: (a) to understand more about how American history courses are taught by reportedly exemplary history teachers, (b) to examine how these teachers vary in their interpretations and representations of the past (cf. also Parker 1987; Thornton 1991;

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[1] To date, five of the six case studies have been completed (two at fifth grade, two at eighth grade, and one at the high school level).

Wilson and Wineburg 1993; Wineburg and Wilson 1988). (c) to learn more about students' prior historical knowledge and the sense they make of the material they encounter in this de facto American history sequence (Naylor and Diem 1987), and (d) to explore how students at various grade levels reason about what they are learning.

The two fifth-grade studies focused on the teaching of and learning about the American Revolution period (VanSledright 1995a; VanSledright and Brophy 1995; VanSledright and Grant, 1994). For the eighth-grade research, the content hinged on British colonization in North America (VanSledright 1995b, in press-a). The high school study again dealt with the American Revolution period (VanSledright, in press-b). These content units were chosen for several practical reasons, but more importantly, because they embodied interesting controversies and a range of competing interpretations. It was hoped that the latter would bring the differences among the teachers and their representations of the past into sharper contour.

In choosing teachers and sites, district social studies curriculum supervisors were contacted with the request that they identify a short list of those in their districts whom they thought were exemplary history teachers at the grade levels specified (fifth, eighth, and high school). In many US public schools, American history is taught at each of these levels, usually as a distinct subject matter (Naylor and Diem 1987). For fifth grade, two recommended teachers were selected primarily because they agreed to participate, but also because they both had reputations for focusing approximately one hour each day of the week to a survey study of American history called for by their district's curriculum. The eighth-grade and high school teachers were selected in the same fashion and largely for the same reasons as the fifth-grade teachers. In the eighth-grade school district, American history (from exploration through North American colonization) was taught in what they called a "World Studies" class. The first half of the yearlong course began with world-wide exploration by European countries, but then narrowed in the second half to exploration and colonization in what became known as the United States, this second part being their version of eighth-grade American history. The high school American history course studied was taught by a teacher in the same district as the eighth-grade teachers. The course began with a review

of North American colonization covered in eighth grade and then proceeded to survey the American Revolution period through the Reagan Administration.

In each study, classes were observed for each class period the units were taught; the teachers were interviewed both formally and informally during the course of the research; all students in each class were asked to complete a brief questionnaire that explored both their prior knowledge and what they learned following the unit; and a subsample of students—six from each class, a total of 30 students—were interviewed extensively both before and after the units to learn about how their ideas changed as a result of their experience with the historical material. Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis. At the end of the postunit interviews, students were asked the two questions concerning purposes for studying American history. Because the same two questions were asked of all 30 students, cross-grade comparisons became possible.

The Students

The 12 fifth graders came from two predominantly middle- to upper-middle-class elementary schools located in the midwest. Eleven of these 12 students were white, reflecting a ratio only slightly smaller than the ratio of whites to ethnic minorities in the schools themselves. From one fifth-grade class, the males were Robert, Jerome, and James, and the females were Janine, Aimee, and Elena[2] (an Hispanic, the only non-white fifth grader). From the other fifth grade class, there were Barry, Adam, and Frederic, the males, and Lorrie, Lara, and Abigail, the females. Students were drawn from middle- to slightly-above-middle achievement levels, generally representative of the classes as a whole.

The eighth graders reflected the significant levels of diversity common to the large, urban, east coast school district from which they were drawn. They also were average in achievement, earning grades of Bs and high Cs. From one school, the males were Sento (Hispanic), and Randy (African American), and the females were Justine and Jarona (both African American), Patty (white), and Amber (Asian American).[3] From the second school, the males were Mark and Sean (both white), and Daniel (Hispanic), and the females were Anita (Hispanic), Jean (African American), and Jennifer (white).

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[2] All identifying names have been changed to pseudonyms.

[3] Efforts were made to balance this group of students by gender, but difficulties arose in obtaining permission from parents

The high school students came from a class labeled "gifted and talented" (or GT).[4] The teacher explained to me that the school (from the same school district as in the eighth-grade studies) had recently broadened its definition of who could qualify for GT classes, rendering the GT as distinct from "regular" tracks almost meaningless. She noted that the difference typically involved slightly better study habits and preparation skills displayed by students in the GT classes. However, there were students in this class that were clearly quite "advanced." By the teacher's account, only one of them—Jacob, who was white—was a participant in the interviews. The other, more "average" students were Peter and Ben, both white males, and Cary, Haley (white), and June (Asian American), the females.

Analyzing Student's Responses

In analyzing the students' responses, I began by separating the two questions that frame this paper from the larger, more extensive verbatim interview transcripts derived from the research procedures used in the case studies.[5] Initially, each of the 30 responses for the first question were studied individually. Categories of responses were generated by creating summaries of the key rationales each student provided within their response. For example, if a student made reference to using the study of history as a way to avoid committing the mistakes made in the past, or a response to this effect, I created a category (*ex post facto*) called "Learning the Lessons of the Past" and noted this student's response in that category. If a student offered more than one type of rationale within his or her overall response, I created a new category phrase to represent each additional rationale. I repeated this process three times and refined the categorization process each time (Bogdan and Biklen 1982; Patton 1990). In this way, *all* aspects of the students' responses were categorized (cf. Tables 1 and 2 for a list of these categories). This process was repeated for question two.

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to allow their children to participate in the study. In addition, the class of 22 from which this subsample was drawn, had only six males.

[4] I was interested first and foremost in studying this particular teacher because she held a Ph.D. degree in American history. It turned out that her teaching assignment consisted of only GT (3) and Advanced Placement (2) classes. I chose to study a GT class because it contained more "average" students than the Advanced Placement classes. I asked the teacher to allow me to observe in the class with the largest proportion of more average achievers.

[5] For an example of the full range of questions used in the semistructured interview protocols, see VanSledright (1995b).

It is customary to conduct interrater reliability exercises in the case of categorizing such data. However, it was not attempted here for two reasons. First, there was no *a priori* coding scheme used that would have placed some responses within the coding framework and eliminated others. Rather, the analysis and categorization process sought to account for *all* of the responses. And second, the intention was to make the response data as transparent as possible. That is, in representing the data within categories, virtually all of the responses that were so classified are presented. This allows readers of what follows to conduct the interrater reliability test themselves by assessing whether responses "match" categories. However, this "matching" process can be slippery. Where responses appeared to overlap categories,[6] for example, I made note of it. To convey a sense of the overall response patterns, I tabulated the results by general categories (cf. Tables 1 and 2).

The Santayanan Purpose and Other Rationales

Although versions of the Santayanan purpose were invoked often, they were far from the only rationales offered by students. Here, I present the different rationales, following each with illustrative quotations from the students for the first question. I then repeat the process for the second question.

[insert Table 1 about here]

Question One: Why do you think they teach you American history in school?

Learning Lessons from the Past

The Santayanan rationale appeared in a variety of forms at all three grade levels, but it was more common among the older students, as Table 1 indicates. The three responses that appeared in the Introduction are examples; here are several others.

Robert (fifth grade):	Well, if you didn't have history and learn everything you do in school, if you go out, something bad could happen to you.
Patty (eighth grade):	Cause it's important to know what happens in times before us, because you can use what you've learned. . .like they say if you make a mistake, then you can learn to correct it for the next time. I hear that from my parents. . . .
Interviewer:	Do your teachers talk about that?
Patty:	Not usually. But I mean that's just something that I might of. . .I

[6] It could be argued that, in some cases, one category could be construed as a subcategory of others. I preferred to distinguish them so as to mine the subtleties produced by conveying them this way.

don't know. . .it's just this thing you feel, because if people are kind of stupid and it doesn't stick in their head after one time.

Sean (eighth grade): I guess so you know a little about how things were before so you have a guideline for standards for living.

Ben (high school): It helps you. Like you know that some wars were not necessary, and you don't need to fight every war. You can just live through it. You can work it out different ways, and you can see, you can learn from the mistakes that people made from history, ...so you don't do them again.

Robert and Sean skirted the edges of the Santayanan rationale, while Patty and Ben stated its case more directly. The older students generally tended toward more intellectually and verbally sophisticated versions of learning from history's mistakes than the younger students. Nonetheless, students at all three levels placed considerable faith in the ability to learn from historical misjudgments. However, none of the 30 students evaluated this rationale and concluded that humans often appear quite myopic when it comes to "learning the lessons of the past" and have continued to make the similar "mistakes" or "miscalculations" repeatedly. Although familiar with some version of the aphorism, these students were not correspondingly equipped with its critique. Nor did they appear to have a sense for judging relevant from irrelevant historical antecedents.

Another feature of students' reliance on this rationale was that students appeared to possess what historians sometimes refer to as a Whig or progressive interpretation of history. Generally, this interpretation holds that history can be thought of as a record of "progress;" that, indeed, people in democracies can only get smarter and more sophisticated, and technological advancement provides the most palatable evidence of this fact. That students believed in the power of "learning the mistakes of the past" suggests that they may be convinced of the inevitable and successful forward development of history, which they judge to be a positive phenomenon. The concept of historical decline was absent from their discourse, suggesting more support for this conclusion (for similar results, cf. Seixas 1994: 293-294).

<u>To Know Everything</u>

A second common theme running through the students' responses was that the purpose for learning American history was to know everything, to learn about the vast world of today and yesterday. This response was invoked more often by the fifth and eighth graders and could be related to the many

things about history, for example, that many of them were learning for the first time. Many responses were offered with an air which suggested that the answer to the question was simple and virtually self-evident, reflecting in some cases age-related naiveté (e.g., that learning school subjects will teach what you need to know about the world).

Janine (fifth): So you can learn about your background and what the United States was before, like when we got here—so you know about what happened and why.

James (fifth): So you'll know about how the country came to be and how you got to where you were. It's important to know how you got where you are because that's the country you live in and you want to know a lot about the country you live in.

Justine (eighth): So you'll know how everything came to be? I don't really know, I mean . . .well it's important so you know how your. . .how. . .I don't know, no one's really told me how. . . . (pause) 'Cause you have to know what happened. I guess so you'll just know how things, you know, the United States became the United States and how we explored America.

Anita (eighth): So you can learn about the past and how the United States was discovered. If you live in a certain place, how it was discovered, how everything started, what special events happened. Just to learn about your past.

Sean (eighth): So we can know what led up to us being here now. So we know what happened before and it's in steps so, this would happen first, then this, then this.

June (high school): I think they want all kids to just learn about all different parts of the world, and their past, instead of just wondering what you'd learn from your parents, and so I guess school covers a lot more.

June, a reticent interviewee who said consistently less than her same-age counterparts, was the only high school student to offer a rationale of this type. The fifth graders whose responses appear above were two of the four students who, in one form or another, provided this type of rationale as an answer to the question, and Justine, Anita, and Sean were three of seven eighth graders. Justine's reply is interesting and unlike the others in that it reveals the difficulty she experienced in working out her response. At one point, she interjected that no one had ever helped her establish reasons for learning American history, a factor which, if it is common, may help explain the high frequency of this fairly sweeping, generic type of response.

Utility

A third common theme turned on versions of the utilitarian rationale. Farman, Natriello, and Dornbusch (1978) found this theme common in their research as well. In its various forms, it ranged from the benefits that learning history might have for a job to its value in giving the student something to talk about with other family members at dinner conversations.

Aimee (fifth): Probably because it's important because when you get into older grades or decide you want to get a job, history may be important. You might have to know lots of stuff about it because you might have to do a quiz or something on history, like if you had to do a play or something, you'd have to research a lot of history, but if you already knew most of it, you wouldn't have to do much research.

James (fifth): It can help you get a job. You could be a history teacher or historian.
Interviewer: What if you weren't interested in those things?
James: Like if someone was talking to you about something, it would help if you knew what they were talking about.

Lorrie (fifth): I might have to study for a test. So you can know it the next day?

Adam (fifth): (long pause) So you can tell your parents when they ask you what you did in school.

Abigail (fifth): You could teach your parents something. My sister and my dad talk a lot at dinner. Half the time I don't know what they're talking about, but, sometimes if they talk about something I know about, I can put my two cents in.

Randy (eighth): Basically, like so you can be able to answer questions from people. If somebody came to visit from another country and they're like saying, "When did you get your independence?" or something like that, you could answer them and you don't look stupid like, "I don't know when, dah. . .".

Anita (eighth): To know why you even go to school; some careers I think you need it. Just to learn about your past.

Jennifer (eighth): If somebody comes up to us and says, "What is the United States?" We can tell them. So we just know the history of America.
Interviewer: What difference does it make if you know about it or don't?
Jennifer: If you want to be a history teacher.
Interviewer: What if you didn't want to be a history teacher?
Jennifer: It's just a requirement.

As these responses and Table 1 indicate, utilitarian rationales were most common among the fifth graders. None of the high school students offered them as a response to this question, but did suggest variations on them regarding the second question concerning the value of learning American history for their lives away from school. In fact, many of the students, especially the older ones, offered a utilitarian

rationale to that second question, more so than to the first. This may reflect the older students' growing intellectual sophistication which allowed them to make finer distinctions between the questions.

The above responses do show how students were able to construct a variety of utilitarian connections between the history they were learning and other aspects of life. Adam's and Abigail's reactions were particularly poignant. However, some might argue that the connections offered by students, whatever their order, were tenuous at best, suggesting the need for work on stronger linkages. Others would argue that learning and studying history is a worthwhile intellectual, mind-disciplining endeavor in itself and needs no significant, non-history utilitarian bridge. In the context of these responses, this latter argument may be more suitable to older students with more sophisticated skills in reading history and the world. The younger students appeared quite facile in creating utilitarian connections and therefore may need them to obtain a level of meaning from learning history. One salient example might be the relationship of "doing well on school subjects" to their desire to please those whose authority they still respect and defer to. However, I do imply later that the heavier emphasis by the younger students on the utilitarian rationale may also be a function of their age-related naiveté, a naiveté that disappears along with the power of the utilitarian rationale the longer the schooling experience lasts.

The Quest for Origins

A less frequent, but still marked rationale for learning American history that emerged is what I refer to as the "quest for origins."

Frederic (fifth): I don't know. . .I just think it's important to learn how this country became what it is.

Justine (eighth): 'Cause you have to know what happened. . .I don't know. I guess so you just know how things. . .how everything's, you know, the United States became the United States.

Daniel (eighth): To let people know what happened and how this country got started. I mean, because I just think it would be important. It would be good for you to know about how [it] became America.

Cary (high school): So we learn about our roots, kind of like where we came from and how we came to be, I mean the country and stuff like that.

Peter (high school): . . .I wonder sometimes how things started, and I would if I didn't know about it. I would wonder how my ancestors [got here] and just how the country got started.

Ben (high school): If you didn't know about history you wouldn't be knowing about how your government worked and how your government came to pass. It's just in the nature of people that they have to know.

Curiosity about the past often provokes people to conduct research and create a historical tree or genealogical timeline. Ben may be right; people just need to know about origins, about the historical context of their lives. While the "quest for origins" was closely linked to the rationale, "forming a self-identity," I separated them to highlight how some students were more apt to state their rationale in more global terms than in the narrower concern about self-identity. To demonstrate the finely-textured differences between these two types of responses, the self-identity rationale is explored next. The older students were more likely than their younger counterparts to generate these two closely connected rationales.

Forming a Self-Identity

None of the fifth graders offered the "history as a part in forming a self-identity" rationale. It appeared in the thinking of only a few of the older students and sometimes in those who generally were more verbally adept and articulate in their responses across the interviews *in toto*.

Sento (eighth): So you know like where you came from and to know what happened [to you]. . . .

Randy (eighth): So you could know about like where you from or. . .like how you got to where you are. . . .

Ben (high school): Because otherwise you won't know who you, what you were. You need to know where you came from. Some people, they want to know where they came from and stuff. If they don't know where they came from, it kinda begins to make them think.

Ben's response was most direct, but Sento and Randy both appeared concerned about a personal focus related to the value of history in developing a self-identity. The personal focus may resonate particularly with these older students as a function of their own contemporaneous search for an identity. If this holds, then using it in the classroom as a rationale for learning history may speak important things to adolescents and serve to increase their learning motivation by connecting a "distant past" to a "present life." It can be constructed as a powerful and meaningful rationale and appears prominently in the work of the noted and highly-respected historian, R. G. Collingwood (1946).

Among the 30 students, Justine and Cary were the only females to invoke "quest for origins/self-identity" type rationales (in contrast to six males). Traditional textbook history has been criticized for writing females out of the past. What remains are celebratory stories of males engaged in heroic military, political, or economic actions. It might be the case that few females read themselves into these accounts and for good reason: they find little in them that seems worth emulating as they develop their own identities. It also suggests that males may be more concerned about identity issues at earlier ages than females and/or that females tie identity questions to other concerns (e.g., empathy and intimacy with others, see also the females' responses in the next category).[7] There is a growing body of literature that supports this latter idea, perhaps the best known work of which is Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) *Women's Ways of Knowing*.

Awareness and Appreciation of Others' Cultures and Time Periods

Jean (eighth): So we'll know more about other people. . . . It's just like nice to know when you're somewhere and you know why it's called this name or why there are so many French people here. Why is the majority like that here? You're more aware.

Cary (high school): We learn about the world so we can understand and appreciate their cultures.

Haley (high school): Probably. . .to let you know what has happened to make us appreciative of what if the colonists hadn't fought for their land, that we wouldn't be here. If the Constitution wasn't written, we wouldn't have the freedoms we do.

Jean's and Cary's responses, unlike Haley's, held connections to what might be learned from a variety of subjects or disciplines other than American history (say sociology, world history, or cultural geography). Haley linked her response directly to American historical contexts about which she was learning. Jean's study of American history was situated in the World Studies course, perhaps partly accounting for the wide reach of her response. Cary and Haley were both in the same American history class, rendering the source or larger context of Cary's "cultures " response more of a mystery.

These were the only such responses and they were offered by only these three females. Again, this rationale may be a form of females expressing identity questions in the context of concerns about

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[7] I wish to thank Jere Brophy for bringing this point to my attention.

others. This rationale also turned up only in the older students. That is probably not unusual; it is fairly sophisticated and generally requires the cognitive ability of being able to place yourself in the position and context of another, an intellectual feat perhaps just beyond the reach of the fifth graders in this study. However, seeing history from different perspectives and developing a sense of historical context and empathy are important attributes of historical understanding that can be cultivated in young students by encouraging them to fully deploy their imaginations in the context of appropriate historical evidence (cf. Dickinson and Lee 1984). Efforts to this end could result in significant increases in understanding the complexities of history.

Socialization Function: Patriotism

Jacob presented what, in my view, was the most compelling and thoughtful rationale. I quote him at length here to provide a full account of the depth of his response. His initial comments appear in the Introduction; here he continues.

Jacob: I think that's the more intellectual study of it [referring to the Santayanan rationale]; and then also if your great, great, great grandfather was Andrew Jackson then you'd want to know that, because that would give you like a sense of pride. I think that's one way that they make an American. The system is designed to make an American with a sense of pride by telling you that your forefathers fought for all of this so that you can do it, and here's how you can take advantage of it. I think that is one of the reasons why they study it in school. They can study it in school so that they just pound the idea into your head that you are an American.

Interviewer: Who is "they" and why are they pounding it in?

Jacob: Well, if you could sort of step back and look at it from three steps back, you'd see that. . .that one thing that. . .if there was a system, and somebody designed the system, and they wanted to make a team spirit for America, one way to do it was to say. . .was to teach people history. Teach people how it was done, how America was formed, and all these other countries were formed because, one, it's nice to know just how stuff was done because it's interesting, and two, if you can make a sort of a country team spirit your country is more willing to fight in wars, and all these other things. Now that may be coincidental, maybe it wasn't designed like that. But it's interesting on one level, and then it sort of builds you up. It builds your American team spirit to know all this stuff. I think it does [that] because all this stuff was done so that you can have the privileges that you have now, and it makes you appreciate it. I think that that is important for people to know.

This is an impressive response and a cognitively sophisticated rationale for a 15-year-old. Although he employed different words and terms, Jacob did argue that an important purpose in studying American history lies in its socialization function; that is, its ability to instill a sense of collective identity

and a patriotic spirit in American students. What appears lacking in his assessment (at least as it appears in this interview setting) is a critique of the patriotic socialization function. Such a critique might entail a description of how unreflective acceptance of onesided happy talk about American virtue peddled as American history can breed blind conformity to nation-state and community authority, something those in power may occasionally welcome, yet a manifest danger addressed by the Constitution. This raises an interesting question: Is Jacob, at 15, ready for the potential cynicism a critique of this sort could produce? This raises concerns about the dilemma of balancing perspectives on American history—say between American vice and virtue—so that all is neither thoughtless allegiance or dour cynicism. At what age level does this balancing act need to begin? Fifth grade? Earlier? Later? This fundamental dilemma faces many history teachers each day and, for thoughtful, reflective teachers, one not easily resolved.[8] Jacob's response brings it to the forefront, as a spur to conversation among students, teachers, historians, curriculum specialists, standards' authors and others about addressing this dilemma.

This issue arises here because, in response to the second of the two rationale questions, a touch of what could be construed as a mild form of political cynicism crept into Jacob's response. After redescribing history's value by invoking a version of Santayana a second time, Jacob illustrated how learning from mistakes had worked in the case of Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and the Gulf War.

> Jacob: If there was a time when somebody looked back it would be the Gulf War and Saddam Hussein. They didn't want Saddam Hussein to get any more powerful so it'd be any harder to fight when. . .he had to be fought. If there was a time that something could have been done—learned—that was the time. Now it may be coincidental. *It may be that they needed a war to make Bush look good, maybe something like that.* (emphasis added)[9]

Too much political cynicism could result in the withdrawal of participation in representative government. If students such as Jacob believe that political decisions—engaging in warfare, for example—are a mere consequence of presidential ambitions and self-aggrandizement, then they might be reluctant to participate on the assumption that it does little good; it is all preordained by the powers that be

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[8] Some would argue that indeed many teachers—following the lead of textbooks—have resolved it by avoiding controversial issues and the potential stain that can result from unearthing incidences of American moral turpitude or outright ethical bankruptcy (cf. Gottleib 1989).

[9] Despite my earlier claim that Jacob lacked a critique of the socialization function, it does appear in his response here that the seeds of one are present.

and beyond the will of the people. That is not to say that Jacob is convinced of this, to the contrary. It is only to raise once again the question concerning the relationships between and among the history of American rectitude, its critique, and the balancing act involved in working out the purposes and processes of teaching and learning history.

American History and Life Away From School

Question Two: How might learning history help you in your life away from school?

Patty (eighth grade): . . .they want you to learn everything but they don't tell you how to apply it to yourself.

Sento (eighth grade): (hesitating) . . .I'm not sure [of history's value]. Kind of... well, not if we're learning something like you don't want to know about.

This question produced many of the same type of responses as the first. A number of the students continued to invoke the Santayanan rationale, but then also focused more narrowly on history's personal utility. The latter is generally what the question asked for if it was interpreted literally. Rather than rehearse similar Santayanan-type rationales, I provide samples of several unique answers to this question (e.g., Patty's and Sento's above) along with other common answers and/or personally utilitarian responses. Table 2 presents response frequencies for this question.

[insert Table 2 about here]

Variations on the Utilitarian Rationale

Jobs. Not unlike responses to the first question, students frequently equated learning history with preparation for jobs and careers. As noted, this appeared to be a part of a larger understanding that school activities and coursework were requisite tasks "essential" to obtaining a life after schooling was complete, an operational definition of the delayed-gratification principle. Studying history seemed to have little value in itself as powerful method for making sense of the world. Although several students did mention the jobs rationale in response to the first question, in the "life away from school" question it appeared more salient, but ironically held less direct personal relevance the older the students became.

Lorrie (fifth): Cause you might want to be a teacher when you grow up and you might have to know history in some jobs if you want to get a job.

Interviewer: What if you wanted to be a truck driver? Why would you need to know history?

Lorrie: I don't know. You'd need geography.

Interviewer: Why do you think everyone should learn about history?
Lorrie: They might change their minds.
Interviewer: Why do you think teachers and parents think it's so important for all kids to learn it now?
Lorrie: Maybe they just want them to know. So you can be smart?

Abigail (fifth): Where else are you going to learn it? You might want to be a historian. You should know your world.

Aimee: (fifth): Well, it might help you in a job if you were someone who was in the legislate [sic], judicial, or executive branch, you might need to know something about the Constitution so that if a new law was brought up, you might be able to say, "All right. It comes under the Fifth Amendment."

Amber (eighth): I guess if you wanna be a social studies teacher, it'd be easier for you.

Daniel (eighth): It might help me with my life away from school, like if someone asked me or something, like a tourist who had never been to America. It would do me good but not really help me that much with my career. I want to be a doctor.

Peter (high school): Depends upon what job you're at. In archeology it would help, and teachers, but I don't know about doctors, it wouldn't help. . .yes, it would. They would learn about medical history. It's just that there are different kinds of history for each job, so it would be good to know about each.
Interviewer: How about for you in your current life?
Peter: I haven't really thought about it much in my daily life but. . .accept for. . .I guess it's just your job, just big jobs, not like working in a pizza place. I'd like to be a doctor so I'd need to know about the medical history, and I'll also learn about the history for computers.

When asked to make their responses more contemporaneous, students, such as Lorrie and Peter, had difficulty finding history's relevance. Peter reverted to discussing its value in terms of jobs, and only certain types of jobs at that. For Peter, history's importance seemed to be connected only to higher status occupations and irrelevant to "working in a pizza place," or the like. Lorrie seemed puzzled by the request to connect history's importance to her present life or those of her fellow fifth graders. The salience of job and career connections appeared linked to the common refrain offered students for the purpose of school in general: to prepare for life following school. Accepting delayed gratification and having the purpose for school life relegated to a relatively distant future made it problematic for these students to connect strong rationales for the value of learning history to their lives away from school. Abigail did imply that history helps you "know your world, " but failed to elaborate on how historical study facilitates it. Daniel imagined being asked for details by a tourist and using his knowledge of

history to answer, but then invoked a career rationale, concluding that, for him, history's value was limited.

As the frequencies indicate, overall the older the students became, the less likely they were to see connections between learning history and its value in an occupation (or, in some cases, to much of anything). As such, the jobs rationale tended to lose its significance as a motivator over time (see also the "Stumped" rationale below). In their survey research, Farman, et al. (1978) noted that social studies subjects (including history) had only loose "articulations" with high school students' views of the importance of future careers. Social studies subjects were judged by these students to be connected to future community work, but then community work was judged to be of lesser importance than careers or marriage and family.

Preparing for a Future: Kids, Sixth Grade, and College. Other students also found history's value in a future less related to jobs or careers.

Robert (fifth): (pauses) If you had kids, you could teach them what happened.

Lara (fifth): So you'd be ready for sixth grade.

Jennifer (eighth): So I'm not (pause), just so you know about it. I don't know exactly how it would help. So you know about where this came from. It might help you get into college.

Lara's teacher had stressed several times during the year that fifth grade was preparation for sixth grade or middle school, an important shift for these elementary students and one they needed to study hard to get ready for. Jennifer was generally puzzled by the question and cast about for possible responses. Robert also was perplexed at first, and then responded by elevating the inflection of his voice at the end of the sentence as though he were asking a question.

As a Conversational Aid. Three eighth graders thought that knowing about history would be valuable as an aid to conversation both in school and at home. That this response occurred only among the eighth graders may suggest their concern with their peers and impression management, something common to early adolescents. Being conversant about history apparently was viewed as a method for impressing friends and family about one's cognitive abilities and avoiding, as Amber put it, the appearance of looking stupid.

Amber (eighth): Because like if someone brings up a conversation about social studies, what happened back then, I mean if you just sat there and you didn't know anything you'd feel stupid, but if you knew something about history you can like. . .if the person gave a wrong answer, you could help them.

Jean (eighth): So I can talk to people about things when there's no conversation.

Randy (eighth): Like maybe like my mom or my dad ask me a question if they don't remember it because it was a long [ago] for them, and it's like I don't know the question they might ask me, you know that's how I can use it or. . . . Just like when we're talking about a subject and someone doesn't know something and they ask you a question you can answer it. But that's really about as much as I use it.

Entertainment. Fifth-grader Aimee was the only student to suggest that history's value to her life away from school might be found in its ability to provide a level of entertainment. Her class had frequently played a type of historical "Jeopardy" as a review exercise. To the question, she said, "It might be fun to quiz your friends, kind of like history 'Jeopardy.'" She had said earlier in the interview protocol that she greatly enjoyed this review game and wanted one day to participate on the "real program." Here, it finds salience as a rationale within the context of her present life because it allows her to appear on television "Jeopardy" vicariously.

Recognizing Things While Traveling. Janine and Jean found importance in using history to identify and understand aspects of the world that they encountered while on vacation or upon traveling to different locations. Neither one, however, elaborated in any detail on how American history specifically helped in this regard.

Janine (fifth): If you go and see something on vacation, something like a trademark or a war or something a long time ago, then maybe you'd know more about what it meant and why it was there.

Jean (eighth): So I'll know if I'm going somewhere what it could be like, like their customs.

Other Responses

Personal Interests. Two students found value in learning history because of its personal appeal.

James (fifth): Well, I play a lot of basketball and you can learn history about basketball and it helps to know that. There probably wouldn't be a hook shot if it weren't for Kareem Abdul Jabar. Also, if you weren't interested in basketball but interested in piano, you could learn the history of piano and about Beethoven.

Haley (high school): I like the wars, that's about it. I've been to battle grounds, like St. Augustine. It interests me more than regular history, the fighting, and the battles and stuff. [I like it] probably for the reasons people fought and what they were fighting for, for freedom or land, how long the battles went on, like seven years, how the leaders directed them, what they told them to do, and just the difference in what our army and navy does, the difference between the weaponry between then and now. It has changed so much.

While clearly an astute and personally meaningful response, James' rationale had little to do with what he was studying in fifth grade American history (a wide-ranging survey course). However, from his and also Haley's response, one can see opportunities to open pathways for inquiry and research into these personal interests (e.g., the history of basketball or some facet of the game). Such opportunities could teach students to read and evaluate historical evidence as historians do. They thereby could learn important lessons about collecting, using, evaluating, and construing information on their topic of interest. Tapping into these interests, even as an outside-class assignment, might provide sizable gains in personal motivation for learning history, add growth in understandings about how historians work, and make in-class study potentially more meaningful as a result. However, these assignments done in isolation from reconfigurations of how history is taught (e.g., moving to an inquiry, research-based approach) likely would have only a marginal influence on how students find value and relevance in their American history courses.

Learning About Your Ethnic Heritage. Also along the lines of personal interest were Justine's and Anita's rationales, wherein they found personal value in history when it focused on their ethnic past.

Justine (eighth): It was black history month and we were learning about Lewis, I don't know his first name, Vladimir, the guy who invented the light bulb, and I was reading a book on black Americans and I knew who he was. Before, I didn't know who invented the light bulb.

Interviewer: How does that affect your life away from school?

Justine: How does that affect my life? Well, I know how our ancestors fled and how they made America America.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel about your African-American past?

Justine: We don't learn a lot about that.

Anita (eighth): If you're African American, you want to know about your people's past. If you're Hispanic you want to know about their past, how they suffered or how they got fame. Hispanics, well I know some of them suffered and some of them got really famous. Because Hispanics in the United states are really. . .well blacks and whites are too, they're being raced upon [sic]. There's a lot of racism so I want to know if there was racism in the past and how they suffered and how they got known and how they came

to the places. In 1400, what would I be doing, what would Hispanics be doing? Where are the Hispanics? I want to know that.

Interviewer: Have your history classes addressed those kinds of questions?

Anita: Not really. They really don't teach you that. Well they teach sometimes like in February they teach about African Americans but they really don't teach you a lot about that. They just do two weeks, three weeks, about that and then they just forget about it. They really don't teach you about that. I want to know. Especially Hispanics, they don't teach you about that. Sometimes they kind of do. When we studied Central and South America, they told you about explorers, what people did, and how people suffered. . . how people are suffering now, the pollution they have in Mexico. That part was really good because we learned about that. We learned about the Aztecs, the Inca. That was really good but that was the only time we actually studied it. I don't know if we are going to study it in tenth grade. . . .

The ethnic-heritage rationale appeared tightly connected to these two students' lives. Both wanted their study of American history to include more on their ethnic backgrounds. They both seemed disappointed that their history classes had not addressed these matters with sufficient circumspection. In many ways, this type of response is akin to the self-identity and cultural-appreciation rationales.

Stumped. Two of the six high school students were almost completely disarmed by this question. After two years of American history and well into the beginning of their third, these two were at a loss to connect their study to aspects of their personal lives. Cary said, "That's a tough one. I have no idea. Make me appreciate what we have now, maybe? I can't think of anything." June said she was not sure. The interviewer then asked, "Can you think of any instance in your own life where learning about the past has made a difference?" June paused for a minute and then reiterated, "I'm not sure." Both approached the question as though it was the first time anyone had asked them anything like it. Also, these two responses provide additional support for the suggestion that, the older the students became, the less likely they were to find much away-from-school value in learning American history.

A Teacher's Rationale. After puzzling over a response to question two, Jennifer concluded that she was unsure. Here is the conversation as it occurred.

Jennifer (eighth): I don't know. I always ask myself, "What's the point of learning this?" but . . . (pauses)

Interviewer: Have you had a teacher who helped you understand that question?

Jennifer: Yes, I've asked my old world studies teacher. Like, "Why do we have to learn this?" He just said, "Because we have to," and "To help you learn about what happened before we were born." That's all.

Jennifer's explanation of her teacher's rationale (along with Cary's and June's responses) suggests more evidence for the contention that rationales for studying history seldom are discussed as a pivotal feature of American history courses, except perhaps when they are offered up loosely coupled with jobs, the following grade in school, or tied to a remote aspect of the future. Jennifer's puzzlement is understandable in light of the general thinness of the rationale she received. However, if period coverage, fact mastery, and test success are clear goals of survey American history courses, her teacher's reply also makes considerable sense. Unfortunately for Jennifer (and Cary and June), she probably will continue to sit in her history classes with only a dim sense of why she is there.

Discussion

Why Learn History in School?

One feature of these responses that is difficult to convey by this cluster of rationales represented in print is the way in which a number of students responded nonverbally to the task of answering this question (and also to Question Two). With the exception of a few who offered the "to know everything" rationale, when asked, students often wrinkled up there faces as though they were momentarily puzzled. This understandably was more pronounced with the younger students, but it did occur with all three age groups. This response feature, coupled with the not infrequent "I don't know" answer, led to the interpretation of these reactions as evidence that students seldom had been asked this type of question. Although most students were able to create reasonable replies to Question One, their nonverbal communication suggested that, in their American history classes, direct considerations of why they study history rarely, if ever, take place.[10] The implications of such an interpretation are important.

For example, two responses illustrate particularly well the possible influence a lack of explicit discussion of rationales may have on learning American history. Two of the eighth graders, Justine and Jarona, appeared to have decided already by age 13 that history's value was limited. Both initially and after casting about for suitable answers (in this case, to each question), they were quite blunt in stating

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[10] In the course of conducting these comparative studies, I have spent a total of approximately 200 hours in these various classrooms observing the five teachers teach a variety of units on American history at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. At no time did I hear any of the five teachers discuss in any direct way what the purpose of learning American history might be.

that they found few reasons for studying history. Its connection to their lives seemed tenuous at best.[11] In her response to the first question, Justine argued,

> I don't really think it has a purpose, 'cause I mean if you're gonna grow up and say you're gonna be. . .it doesn't really. . .I don't know. It depends on what you're gonna be, like if you grow up and you're gonna be say like a babysitter at a daycare center; I mean, knowing what happens around how England came over here and everything, doesn't really have to do with what you're gonna be when you grow up.[12]

To the second question, Justine said, "Well, like it [television] will say something about it [American history] and I'll go "Oh I know that." But like I don't really do anything outside of school that pertains to [history] school work." Jarona responded to Question Two with, "It [history] doesn't [have value away from school]. To me it doesn't. 'Cause I don't go home and think about you know 1602 or 16 something. You know, I don't. I mean I can understand modern world history, but not you know American history."

The implicit message of an absent exploration of rationales seems to turn on the idea that students come to class to learn the "what" of the American past. This is a part of what it means to "do schoolwork"—to glean generally lifeless knowledge and information from textbooks and teacher experts. As the fifth grader, Lara, said, ". . .there's a lot of important facts that we can learn from history." The "why" question has little place in such a view. Students were not expected to address it and therefore were initially puzzled with the question. This may help account for the relatively wide array of different rationales students offered; that is, students sampled possibilities by invention.

For their part, teachers typically are not expected to address the "why" question either. Their job traditionally has been to impart knowledge and information about the content of American history. Coverage of facts can be presumed as the rationale; that is what tests often measure. These tests also can

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[11] It is notable that these females were two of the four African American students interviewed. While other students had reservations about the value of history (e.g., Frederic, a white fifth grader, said at one point that he simply did not know a good reason for learning American history), these two were the most open and direct. Through their body language, they also intimated a level of disdain for the whole enterprise, as though it was a waste of time. Justine did find a connection when she later noted that she found studying African American history during February quite valuable.

[12] Justine does hold a standard—"what you are going to be when you grow up"—against which she evaluates learning history. This may suggest that students, especially adolescents, are confronted regularly with career questions and conclude that "school work" and careers must go together somehow. If the career rationale is widely held and is perhaps the only explicit standard for judging the value of school in general, and there is some evidence here which says that it is, then history's importance will almost always fare poorly.

be employed to evaluate teachers' abilities to teach fact mastery. Additionally, the curriculum documents from the districts in which these five teachers taught were silent about rationales, presenting instead long lists of historical concepts and topics to be covered—all part of the entrenched "grammar of schooling" (Tyack and Tobin 1994).

If the student responses presented here are any index, a significant piece of building historical understanding appears to be left unattended. In the absence of rich, explicit classroom discourse about the reasons for and value of learning American history, it seems clear that students, regardless of age, still construct assumptions about reasons for historical study. However, some might question whether certain rationales are more powerful than others in themselves and as learning motivators and, as a result, whether direct help in constructing rationales would be good practice. Also at issue is the possibility that, without directly addressing the rationale question, some students will conclude that learning history has no real purpose other than as a required school subject. If these students frequently are from minority groups (and even perhaps if they are not), then teaching American history, in part as a socialization process, may be far less than successful.

The discussion so far has pursued a second point implicitly. That point hinges on examining the view of history inherent in the students' responses. The frequency with which versions on the Santayanan rationale appeared—that we study history to correct our mistakes—along with similar variations suggests that students understand history as a fixed tale, a body of inert facts, holding within it a series of important moral lessons that must be learned, stored in memory, and acted upon at the proper time (cf. also Seixas 1994). With the possible exception of Jacob's response, reading the remaining 29 answers to this first question revealed repeatedly the depth with which students were convinced of history's inert but applicable moral role. Assuming that a fair measure of what they have learned about American history has come from the classroom, it implies that these students' teachers also hold a similar view of history.

There is an older historiographical view—characterized by Michael Kammen (1995) as "stabilized history"—in which proponents believe that the history we read is a result of the scientific and cumulative amassing of putative facts (Greene 1994, 92), and therefore is generally thought to be uncontested

knowledge. However, an examination of the field—over the last two decades especially—indicates that the history we encounter is anything but a fixed, uncontested body of scientific knowledge (e.g., Harlan 1989; LaCapra 1985; Levine 1993; Novick 1988; White 1987). Contrary to what these students seemed to have learned, many aspects of history are more or less in a constant state of revision as new evidence appears, as historians interpretations of the past shift in light of new evidence, and/or as they reconfigure existing evidence. A fully definitive account of, say, the Civil War remains elusive. According to the assessments of recent scholarship—what some call the "new history"—historical accounts are primarily a constructed result of historians' evolving concern with evidenced-based interpretations and reinterpretations. Therefore, the moral lessons history is supposed to hold, according to these students, are subject to a variety of interpretations, arguments, and points of view, rendering their moral certainty as elusive as any a historical account.

Extending this idea, it can be argued that at the heart of a democratic society lies the struggle to read history in ways that do more than tell us who we were and are becoming (self-identity); we also read history to help us learn who we wish to become and avoid not becoming if possible (the Santayanan aphorism). So the students do have links to these two powerful rationales. However, also at the core of democratic societies are disputes about how to read this history—how to interpret it. Problematic then are rationales which suggest that history offers "fact-based, clear-cut answers" to life's dilemmas. In light of recent historical scholarship, historical accounts would need to be approached as tentative arguments, traces of the past (and perhaps fictions) that may contain seeds of wisdom, but only seeds.

Continuing this reasoning, these students could learn to understand historical accounts as interpretations and arguments (Carretero and Voss 1994), even as early as fifth grade (cf. Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin 1993; Levstik 1989; McKeown and Beck 1990). They could learn how historians go about the task of constructing history, how evidence is used to develop narratives of past experience, how accounts contain the frames of reference of historians, and how these frames of reference generally constitute the use of evidence. Such an approach would tend to reconfigure what happens in classes attended by these students. Historical evidence clearly would be dealt with, but the cultivation of an inquiring, critical, evaluative stance also would factor in heavily. This stance already is

present in Justine and Jarona, a seedling in Jacob, and perhaps not beyond the ability of many these fifth graders. The questions asked of students, tacitly at least, required an evaluative position, and most of the students had little difficulty constructing some stance. However, the depth of their ability and perhaps interest in (both issues that need further study) assuming a well-cultivated evaluative position appeared underdeveloped. Presumably, this was connected to the lack of direct attention to addressing reasons for studying history in the classroom and the presence of a deeply embedded "stabilized" view of history. The *National Standards for United States History* (1994) also attempt to address this view of history by calling for a more inquiry-based approach to the history curriculum.

It is important not to ignore the practical classroom value of asking students to develop critical, inquiring habits of mind when reading and discussing history. Inviting students to engage in thoughtful rationale-building about the history they study and adopting an interrogating stance might provide considerable motivation for learning (cf. Kobrin 1992), a matter most teachers will tell you is often foremost on their minds. However, to support such possible motivational enhancements, assessment practices also would have to change to reflect the different view of historical knowledge and understanding required in moving to this position.

Change in curriculum and assessment practices would be necessary but insufficient to bring about shifts in views of history and the development of corresponding rationales for studying it that might prove powerful, exciting, and interesting to students. Teachers play the most pivotal role in such shifts. However, many current teachers were taught a consensus, stabilized view of history during their K-12 school and university experience. If history is thought of as uncontentious and objectified knowledge, then historical facts—those contained in authoritative textbooks, for example—can be left to speak for themselves. Talk about the why of historical study is unnecessary; instead the focus turns to memorizing the content of the past. When asked about their views of history and reasons for its study, four of the five teachers that were participants in the case studies conveyed the older, objectivist, or stabilized understanding of the past. These four were unaware of the more recent changes in the discipline of history. As a result, they understood the task of their students to be that of mastering historical facts (a view commensurate with the official school history curriculum in the districts where they taught). The

fifth teacher was fully aware of the recent changes in the discipline, thought of history as largely an interpretive enterprise with historian's judgments at its center, and referred to herself as a new historian. She was observed to be in the midst of working through the process of constructing representations and rationales for her students that represented her views, yet support for doing so in her school community was sparse and exemplary models were difficult to locate and emulate.[13]

If students are to develop more powerful rationales for learning history, ones that reflect recent developments in the discipline, then teachers will have to know more about them. Learning more about current historiographical debates and changes in views of historical significance would be especially helpful (cf. also Seixas, 1994). However, in the process, teachers will encounter epistemological positions that are foreign to consensus, stabilized approaches to history. Old epistemologies recede slowly, so extended efforts and professional development support along with desire for change in school, disciplinary, and research communities would be necessary to bring a shift to fruition.[14]

Importance of History for Life Away From School?

Presuming that discussions of rationales for studying American history are a sparse feature of standard American history courses, then it stands as a significant feat that many of these students—especially the younger ones—were able to offer interesting and coherent responses to this question. Clearly, they need and are able to construct rationales of their own for why they learn about the history of their nation. But, again, some would argue that the depth and power of a number of the rationales could be enhanced. This is a difficult assertion to disregard. While it is the case that the jobs and ethnic-heritage rationales, for example, were personally compelling for several of these students, unless they are attended to in more depth than what students report here, their tacit or phantom status in American history courses may breed skepticism of and distrust in the value of the educational process in general as the students grow more aware of them as they get older. This seems to me to be the reverse of what we would want from our educational endeavors.

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[13] For more on this high school teacher, see VanSledright (in press-b).

[14] Wineburg (1991) refers to the chasm marking the divide between the older epistemologies found in schools and the new historiographical scholarship "the breach between school and academy." Aspects of the data I present here and the data he offers suggest many parallel implications.

Notable for their absence are possible rationales students did not offer as responses to this second question, interestingly (perhaps ironically) rationales that the *National Standards for United States History* (1994) say are essential. For example, no one noted directly the participatory citizenship implications of learning history. No one suggested or implied that American history can be interpreted as a struggle to widen the franchise of Americans who participate in making the country's future, that this widened franchise can be construed as a fundamental legacy they inherit and upon which they must continue to act. No one argued that their appropriation of it could be considered crucial to their roles as participating citizens, searching out ways to strengthen, protect, and defend it as their heritage. No one noted this is a proactive legacy and responsibility, related to but not the equivalent of the more reactive Santayanan-type rationales invoked by many of the students, and at some distance from the more narrowly utilitarian "jobs" and "conversational aids" rationales offered.

As a second example, consider that no one, on their own terms, suggested that understanding history, and what and how historians have written about it, has helped them to learn to reason about evidence and use it to their advantage in constructing oral and/or written arguments about their personal interests, the past, present, or future. No one suggested that it opened up their powers of reflection and critique, allowing them greater expertise in assessing their experience and broadening their more general ability to make informed decisions about their own lives. And no one argued that well-developed historical understanding could be used as a tool to produce an enriched intellectual and imaginative life.[15]

This is not to suggest that students (or their teachers for that matter) suffer from some deficit of fundamental insight into reasons for studying history because they were unable to generate them here. Rather, it is to argue (a) that there are a number of strong rationales available that are within the range of students' abilities to appropriate for themselves, (b) that many of these rationales may have personal relevance and motivational power, (c) that they need to be directly considered with students of a variety of ages in the context of studying American history, and (d) that they are ignored to the possible detriment of

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[15] The selection of these examples is meant to be illustrative, *not* exhaustive. Clearly, other powerful rationales exist that were not offered by the students.

developing in students significant levels of historical understanding (Jennifer, particularly, comes to mind here).

Conclusion

Taking this argument, and the students' lives around which it centers, seriously may mean, as I indicated earlier, a shift in how American history courses are configured and taught. Such a shift could be modeled (at least for history courses) on the sort of epistemological changes experienced in the community of historians and social studies educators (Seixas 1993) and/or on a consideration of recommendations made in the National History Standards documents. A shift would entail many things but most notably a move away from the standard textbook-dominated American history survey courses common in United States schools. Rather than stressing the systematic accumulation of historical facts into a more or less singular, "consensus" account of American history (a mythical construction by many historians' standards), multiple interpretations and points of view would predominate, questions of evidence use would arise frequently, and debate about the "construction of history" would be common. Considering and developing rationales for learning history would be a pivotal aspect of the overall discussion. What some might fear would be lost in classroom management could be offset by gains in student motivation and personal interest in the past. Direct support for teachers as they learned about and then facilitated this process would be crucial. Without it, very little of the shift will be realized.

However, if fact mastery, content coverage, and traditional multiple-choice test-score success remain the principal goals and features of the history curriculum, then we may need to be content with the type of results unearthed by the 1986 NAEP test on history (cf. Ravitch and Finn 1987) and its 1994 counterpart. Parents, educators of all stripes, curriculum specialists, policy makers, and administrators also may need to remain content with students who grow to find less and less of compelling value in the study of history (hardly a recipe for achieving the world class standards specified in recent national curriculum projects). And finally, if these students and their contexts are indexical, neither will we find much solace or success in continuing to blame the victims for their knowledge, understanding, and motivational lapses.

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Table 1. Responses to the question "Why do you think they teach you American history in school?"

Type of Response	Grade Level			
	Fifth (n=12)	Eighth (n=12)	High School (n=6)	Total
Learning lessons from the Past	2	3	2	7
To Know Everything	4	7	1	12
Utility	6	4	0	10
Quest for Origins	1	2	3	6
Forming Self-Identity	0	3	1	4
Awareness/Appreciation	0	1	2	3
Socialization Function	0	0	1	1
I Don't Know	6	3	0	9
Doesn't Have a Purpose	0	1	0	1
Miscellaneous *	0	0	1	1
Totals	19**	24**	9**	52

* Singular responses not fitting the other types of response categories.
** Most students offered more than one type of rationale within their response.

Table 2. Responses to the question "How might learning history help you in your life away from school?"

Type of Response	Grade Level			
	Fifth (n=12)	Eighth (n=12)	High School (n=6)	Total
Learning Lessons from the Past	3	3	2	8
Jobs	3	4	1	8
Preparing for the Future	2	2	0	4
As a Conversational Aid	0	3	0	3
Entertainment	1	0	0	1
Recognizing Things	1	1	0	2
Personal Interests	1	0	1	2
Ethnic Heritage	0	3	0	3
Stumped	0	0	2	2
A Teacher's Rationale	0	1	0	1
No Connections	0	2	1	3
Not Sure	4	5	3	12
Miscellaneous *	3	2	2	7
Totals	18**	26**	12**	56

* Singular responses not fitting the other types of response categories.
** Most students offered more than one type of rationale in their response.